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THE RELIGION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

A Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science in Education
in the Graduate Program of
Eastern Illinois State College

By

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1955

Approved by:

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PREFACE

The purpose of this paper is to set forth a true picture of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln. His attitude toward the Christian religion has not always been interpreted the same by everyone, but an endeavor has been made here to show the true interpretation in the light of proper evidence.

"For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he: . . ." ¹ says the Scriptures, and also, " . . . out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh". ²

Abraham Lincoln spoke many things that would indicate his attitude toward religion, and from these utterances or writings of his we may form our opinions. What person believed, or believes today, that Lincoln spoke that which he did not feel or believe in his heart? Lincoln was known to be honest.

It is hoped that the evidence set forth herein will help the reader form a reasonably accurate opinion as to Lincoln's attitude toward Religion.

This paper is an outgrowth of a course on Abraham Lincoln taught by Dr. Charles H. Coleman, author and authority on Lincolniana.

¹Proverbs 23: 7.

²Matthew 12: 34.

INTRODUCTION

Bishop Fowler once said: "Let us analyze Lincoln if we are able. This task is difficult on account of his symmetry. He was too much like a sphere that projects farthest in every direction. His comprehension is to us impossible on account of his immensity, for a man can be comprehended only by his peers".³

That last statement is particularly significant. "A man can be comprehended only by his peers". It seems too many people have thought they comprehended Lincoln when they were hardly his peers. In that case how could they do it indeed?

Lincoln was a man known to be possessed of mental and physical ability. A stool must have at least three legs on which to stand. So a man's life to stand as a success must have at least three phases. Let us now look into that third phase of any well-rounded individual's life, the spiritual side, and see how Lincoln measured up as we think a man reasonably should.

First let us consider some words of Barton concerning Lincoln's religion: " . . . We should find ourselves compelled

³Bishop Fowler's oration on Lincoln (p. 28) as quoted in William E. Barton's The Soul of Abraham Lincoln, p. 253. Cited hereafter as Barton.

to believe in the reality of Lincoln's religion. We may not be able to do so to our complete satisfaction after we have finished; we might even question, and we may still question, whether he himself ever fully defined it. But we are assured that his religion was real and genuine, and that it grew more vital as he faced more completely the moral and spiritual aspects of the work to which, as he honestly believed, he was divinely called".⁴

Finally, in this same vein, let us consider some words of Taggart: " . . . But let us beware lest we secularize Lincoln, lest we remember his deeds, and miss his spirit. The body without the soul is dead. Too many biographers have de-Christianized Lincoln."⁵

⁴Barton, op. cit., p. 97.

⁵Raymond D. Taggart, D.D., The Faith of Abraham Lincoln, p. 14. Hereafter cited as Taggart.

I

EARLY LIFE

"Of all the Presidents of the United States, Lincoln was probably one of the least orthodox, yet the most religious".¹

Abraham Lincoln was born in central Kentucky on February the twelfth, 1809. In his primitive environment let us see some of his first contacts with forces of a religious nature. Lincoln's parents were good people. Lincoln thought well of them. They attended church, and it has been stated that his mother read the Bible to him when he was a child, although she probably was illiterate. Of course Abraham was led to attend church since his parents did, and what he saw and heard at church made an impression on his active mind. Ward Hill Lamon gives an account of a possible stirring by the preacher of Lincoln's desire to be a public speaker himself--also of Lincoln's kindness and emotion shown as a boy and how he could affect others with his words. He states:

Abe had a very retentive memory. He frequently amused his young companions by repeating to them long passages from the books he had been reading. On Monday mornings he would mount a stump, and deliver with a wonderful approach to exactness, the sermon he had heard the day before. His taste for public speaking appeared to be natural and irresistible. His stepsister, Matilda Johnston, says he was an indefatigable "preacher". "When father and mother would go to church, Abe would take down the Bible,

¹Sherwood Eddy, as quoted in Edgar DeWitt Jones' Lincoln and the Preachers, 134. Cited hereafter as Jones.

read a verse, give out a hymn, and we would sing. Abe was about fifteen years of age. He preached and we would do the crying. Sometimes he would join in the chorus of tears. One day my brother, John Johnston, caught a land terrapin, brought it to the place where Abe was preaching, threw it against the tree, and crushed the shell. It suffered much--quivered all over. Abe then preached against cruelty to animals, contending that an ant's life was as sweet to it as ours to us".²

These incidents took place when Lincoln was about fifteen years old. His family had moved from Kentucky to Indiana near Gentryville in the vicinity of Little Pigeon Creek. Thomas Lincoln left the Knob Creek farm in Kentucky when Abraham was seven years old.

To return to Lincoln's home environment as related to religion, Taggart says: "But let us come to those who were immediately the parents of Lincoln's religious faith. He was blessed with three godly parents: his father, Thomas Lincoln; his mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln; his step-mother, previously a widow, Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln".³ Speaking of Thomas Lincoln, Taggart continues: ". . . In his home there was grace before meals and regular family worship, for his wife had taught him to read. He was a member of the Baptist church both in Kentucky and later at Little Pigeon, Indiana, where on one occasion at least he was the moderator of a commission

²Ward Hill Lamon, The Life of Abraham Lincoln, pp. 39-40.

³Taggart, op. cit., p. 21.

appointed to settle a difficulty between two of the church sisters. That appointment would indicate that he was considered a man of some judicious ability".⁴

Lincoln once said of his mother: "All that I am, all that I hope to be, I owe to my angel mother--blessings on her memory". In their nine years together she had taught him Bible stories and later the Bible chapters. When she died, she placed a frail hand on Abe's head and asked him to be good and kind to his father and sister and to live as she had taught him, loving kindred and worshipping God. When he became President he said: "I remember her prayers, and they have always followed me. They have clung to me all my life".⁵ Lincoln was fortunate in getting Sarah Bush Lincoln for his step-mother. She had good sense in her head and love in her heart, and Lincoln and she had a mutual love for each other.⁶

The churches Lincoln attended in his early life doubtless had a great bearing on his attitude toward slavery. Warren says: "It may be said that Abraham Lincoln was born in an atmosphere charged with slavery controversy. It is impossible to conceive of a more tense community situation than that existing in the South Fork neighborhood relative to slavery

⁴Ibid., p. 21.

⁵Ibid., pp. 21-22.

⁶Ibid., p. 28.

during the period when the Lincolns lived there".⁷

As to the South Fork Church's stand on the slavery question, Warren states:

. . . When Abraham Lincoln was born the church was closed because of the controversy over human bondage, and fifteen members had gone out of the church "on account of slavery", to organize the Little Mount Anti-Slavery Baptist Church. It was this organization with which the parents of Abraham Lincoln became affiliated. There the first sermons Abraham heard were by William Downs and David Elkins, celebrated Baptist preachers who ministered for the church, and who were opposed to the institution of slavery. From this brief recital of early religious contacts of the President's forbears, one may draw his own conclusions as to the influence of the Baptist background in the life of Abraham Lincoln.⁸

Lincoln was tolerant--allowed the right of other people to their own ideas and never berated or despised a sincere opponent. He did not always find tolerance in the early preaching he heard. Barton says concerning this:

The prevailing and almost the sole type of religion in that part of Indiana during Lincoln's boyhood was Baptist, and in spite of all that Mrs. Lincoln believed about the freedom of it, it was a very unprogressive type of preaching. The preachers bellowed and spat and whined and cultivated an artificial "holy tone" and denounced the Methodists and blasphemed the Presbyterians and painted a hell whose horror even in the backwoods was an atrocity. Against it the boy Abe Lincoln rebelled. Many another boy with an

⁷ Louis Austin Warren, Lincoln's Parentage and Childhood, p. 289. This South Fork Baptist Church was not far from the home of Lincoln's parents in Kentucky.

⁸ Louis Austin Warren, ed., "Lincoln's Baptist Background", Lincoln Lore No. 1042 (March 28, 1949).

active mind has been driven by the same type of preaching into infidelity.⁹

The question might be raised, why didn't Lincoln join the church when he was quite young? The situation he found himself in in the Pigeon Creek church in Indiana seems a good answer. A Lincoln Lore Bulletin states: "The supposition is that he would not have been invited to join. There were practically no young people on the book of the Pigeon Creek Church. It was a list of adults. Church membership was too serious an affair to be publicly embraced by those who had not settled down in life The fact that he didn't marry is probably responsible more than any other one thing for his non-affiliation with the church" ¹⁰

Lincoln's parents moved from Indiana to Macon County, Illinois, and settled near Decatur. They later moved to Coles County near Charleston but Lincoln took up his abode in the village of New Salem. "In New Salem as well as in his former homes in Kentucky and Indiana, Lincoln lived in a Southern pioneer atmosphere. His contact with its people helped him understand the Southern temperament and point of view. He entered with zest into the theological discussions of the community, and profited by the nicities of thought, the subtle

⁹Barton, op. cit., p. 48.

¹⁰Lincoln Lore No. 661 (Dec. 8, 1941).

distinctions and fine-spun arguments that they necessitated. Yet, while he enjoyed them as a mental exercise and while he eventually attained to a deep faith, emotionally the bitterness of sectarian prejudice must have been repellent to him, and was probably a cause of his lasting reluctance to affiliate with any sect.¹¹

Unfortunately while living in New Salem Lincoln read some books that caused him to have some doubts about the Christian belief. At that time he well could have been looked upon as an infidel. The word means one who is unfaithful, and so has come to be synonymous with an unbeliever--anyone who proves unfaithful to the traditions of his family is in their eyes an infidel. When a Hebrew becomes a Christian, we say he has become a believer, but his kinsmen after his flesh say he is an infidel. The same holds for a Catholic turning Protestant, or vice versa. Lincoln in 1835 probably considered himself an infidel.¹²

Of course being an "infidel" is a relative term. It depends on certain conditions such as who is calling the name, what his views are, and at what period he lives or what locality he lives in. Barton says: "If Lincoln was regarded as an infidel, and if he ever was tempted to think himself one, we

¹¹ Benjamin P. Thomas as quoted in Paul M. Angle, ed., The Lincoln Reader, p. 63.

¹² Taggart, op. cit., pp. 307-308.

should not be justified in accepting that judgment as final until we knew and considered what was required in that time and place to constitute an infidel. In the mind of most if not all the Baptist preachers whom Lincoln heard while he was in New Salem, a belief that the earth was round was sufficient to brand a man as an infidel¹³

We do and think when we are younger as we would not do or think after we are older, and the years give a better insight because of experience and maturing judgment.

Lincoln leaned toward free thinking or infidelity, according to some. As has been stated some books he read influenced him. Although one of the founders of New Salem was a preacher of the Cumberland Presbyterian faith, and the coming of the Bale family brought two Baptist preachers, Abraham and Jacob Bale, as residents of the town, and although Peter Cartwright and other Methodist preachers came frequently and preached in the schoolhouse or in the Rutledge tavern, there was in New Salam a rather strong tendency toward what is called infidelity. Paine's Age of Reason and Velney's Ruins were in active circulation. Lincoln read them, and they were not without their influence upon his thinking.¹⁴

The fact that these books did influence Lincoln may have prompted him to write something of a similar nature himself.

¹³Barton, op. cit., p. 63.

¹⁴William E. Barton, The Life of Abraham Lincoln, Vol. I, p. 195.

Let us consider what some writers have to say about Lincoln's books. Barton says: "We have here our one witness that Mr. Lincoln while at New Salem freshly risen from the reading of Volney and Paine, and having what Lamon called the "itch for writing" wrote some kind of essay adverse to the doctrines of Christianity as Lincoln then understood them Lincoln did, then, write something of this character, and it may have been burned;"15

Hill, McNamar and Lincoln may all have been suitors for Ann Rutledge's hand in New Salem. Hill well may have written a letter to McNamar, Ann's sweetheart who had left, to see if he were alive and still cared for Ann. Also this letter could have been dropped, and could have been picked up by children and handed to Lincoln who it seems had beaten Hill's time after McNamar had dropped out of the picture. Barton further states: "This was the document which Lincoln held in his hand when he and Hill came to their final reckoning concerning the heart of Ann Rutledge. And the argument between them, while friendly, developed some heat, and that was what Hill snatched from Lincoln's hand and threw into the fire".16

Mentor Graham, Lincoln's instructor in surveying and English grammar while in New Salem, also speaks of the burned book or letter. Here is what Graham says about it: "Some of

¹⁵Ibid., p. 150.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 151.

the school children had picked up the letter and handed it to Lincoln. Hill and Lincoln were talking about it, when Hill snatched the letter from Lincoln and put it into the fire. The letter was respecting a young lady, Miss Ann Rutledge, for whom all three of these gentlemen seemed to have respect".¹⁷

Concerning this essay Taggart gives reference to another man who knew Lincoln well, and says: "John G. Nicolay, private secretary to the former President says this about it: 'Yes, there is a story and it is probably true, that when he was very young and very ignorant he wrote an essay that might be called atheistical. It was after he had been reading a couple of atheistical books which made a great impression on his mind, and the essay is supposed to have expressed his views on these books--a sort of review of them containing both approval and disapproval--and one of his friends burned it. He was very indignant at the time, but afterwards glad of it'".¹⁸

Mentor Graham, mentioned above, with whom Lincoln boarded for two years, had the manuscript in his possession for two weeks and examined it and tells a very different story as to its contents. There was a question of the "Spit and Argue" club which met in Mr. Hill's store as to whether the essay was for or against Christianity. He is the only one who claims to have read it or heard it whose testimony we have. It will be

¹⁷Ibid., p. 154.

¹⁸Taggart, op. cit., p. 37.

sufficient to say here that he affirms that it was not an attack upon but a defense of Christianity.¹⁹ This refers to the manuscript which was a defense of universal salvation. This is referred to in Graham's letter to B. F. Irwin, which is one of three letters by different people mentioned later that give evidence of Lincoln's belief in universal salvation.

This essay in question that Lincoln wrote, Graham thought not to have been burned.²⁰ The paper which was burned was, according to Mr. Graham, the one which was respecting Ann Rutledge, and has been mentioned in this paper.

One more source of reference agrees with this thought Mr. Graham entertained, the idea of a personal letter being burned. To quote Joseph F. Newton: " . . . The document burned up was not an essay on theology; it was a love letter".²¹ The question is, then, just what was burned? It seems, then, that the letter in question may well have been a letter written by Hill instead of some expression of infidelity on Lincoln's part. The former seems well corroborated; the latter waits for further proof.

There is some reason to believe that Lincoln was a Universalist, at least in his earlier years. Mentor Graham,

¹⁹Ibid., p. 38.

²⁰Ibid., p. 309.

²¹Joseph F. Newton, D.D., "The Spiritual Life of Lincoln: An Interpretation", Abraham Lincoln Association Papers, p. 31. (An address given by Dr. Newton in Springfield, Illinois on February 13, 1933). Cited hereafter as Lincoln Association Papers.

Isaac Cogdall, and Jonathan Harnett made statements that were printed by B. F. Irwin that would show Mr. Lincoln as a Universalist in 1833, 1858, and 1859. B. F. Irwin, editor, states: "I think I have clearly proved that Lincoln was a Universalist . . . that in 1850-58-59 he was still a Universalist".²²

Irwin also says: "Before closing I wish it distinctly understood that if I could show that Lincoln was not an infidel without showing him a Universalist, I would do so; that I am not trying to bolster up Universalism on Lincoln's faith, as I am not a Universalist myself".²³

Taggart says concerning the belief that Lincoln was a Universalist: "To find definite conclusive evidence that he (Lincoln) did not believe in universal salvation may not be so easy. Indeed it is easier to believe that the wishful thinking of this broken, tender-hearted man who never could refuse a pardon if there could be found any reason or excuse for granting it, might lead him to extreme views on the mercy of God".²⁴

Barton says of Lincoln's reasoning at this time: "On this point, then, we have abundant witness. Lincoln argued from the

²²B. F. Irwin, The Illinois State Journal, May 15, 1874. As quoted in Barton, op. cit., pp. 350-351 (appendices). Cited hereafter as Irwin.

²³Irwin, as quoted in Taggart, op. cit., p. 312.

²⁴Taggart, op. cit., p. 312.

fall of man to the redemptive work of Christ as the Baptist preachers were in the habit of doing, but instead of finding there the basis of an argument for individual election and particular salvation or damnation, found in it the basis of faith in universal salvation".²⁵

²⁵Barton, op. cit., pp. 152-153.

II

POLITICS

Lincoln carried his religion into politics. If he knew his client was guilty he lost power to defend him and may even have failed to appear, but if he was convinced that the cause was just, he had a spirit and a fire about him that convinced people of the justice in his reasoning.

He may not have talked much about religion in his earlier days. Perhaps he said nothing about his religious views to some of his friends and associates. Weik tells what some of his friends said about this:

Judge Davis declares: "I don't know anything about Lincoln's religion--don't think anybody knew". His neighbor in Springfield, James Gourley, to whom Lincoln talked as familiarly and with as little reticence as he talked to anyone except Herndon, was of like opinion. "Had he ever had a change of heart, religiously speaking, he would have told me about it", insists Gourley. "He couldn't have avoided it". G. O. Brown who often talked to Lincoln says that he "never heard Lincoln say anything about his religious views--or religion in any aspect".¹

This is before he had his deeper feelings about religion--before the change took place. Nevertheless even during his earlier political career he was honest and good. He wanted to achieve good through politics and stayed true to ideals.

¹Weik, MSS, as quoted in Albert J. Beveridge, Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858, Vol. 1, p. 539.

T. V. Smith speaks of his honesty and goodness in these lofty terms:

Lincoln was a specialist in the field of goodness, and as such was in his modest finitude a mighty agent of the spiritual life. But he was an agent of the spiritual life conceived as servitude to Truth hardly less than of the spiritual life conceived as devotion to goodness. . . . He pretended to be what alone he was, a politician. It was in being what he was that there glinted forth, unintendedly and frequently unconsciously, reflections of light upon his own specialized virtue from the sum of the whole of man's spiritual empire.²

More than one man has mixed religion and politics.

Barton says:

There was never any danger than ministers would make up a controlling faction in the Illinois Legislature; but they were not a negligible element in the early political life of the state. Lincoln soon came into the political atmosphere which was thus affected by religious controversy, and it had an influence upon him. His most formidable and persistent opponent, until he met Douglas, was a Methodist preacher, the redoubtable Peter Cartwright who defeated him in a contest for the Legislature and whom he defeated in a race for Congress. Lincoln was quite familiar with religion in its relation to politics in early Illinois.³

"Peter Cartwright denounced him as an infidel in their race for Congress, and some devout men voted against him on that score. No matter. Lincoln did not reply, even when his

²T. V. Smith, Abraham Lincoln and the Spiritual Life, pp. 25-26. Cited hereafter as Smith.

³Barton, op. cit., pp. 60-61.

friends urged him to do so, saying that he would not discuss his religious faith on a political stump".⁴

But we find he did reply after all. Dr. Harry Pratt, then executive secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association, recently found a letter in which Lincoln wrote to Mr. Ford, editor of the Illinois Gazette of Lacon, Illinois, contradicting the claim of infidelity brought against him by Mr. Peter Cartwright, his competitor for the office of United States Representative from Illinois.⁵

Here are the contents of the handbill (with some omissions) replying to the charges of infidelity:

July 31, 1846. To the Voters of the Seventh Congressional District.

Fellow Citizens:

A charge having got into circulation in some of the neighborhoods of this district, in substance that I am an open scoffer at Christianity, I have by the advice of some friends, concluded to notice the subject in this form. That I am not a member of any Christian church is true; but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular. It is true that in early life I was inclined to believe in what I understood is called the "Doctrine of Necessity"--that is, that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control; and I have sometimes (with one, two, or three, but never publicly) tried to maintain this opinion in argument. . . .

⁴Abraham Lincoln Association Papers, op. cit., 1933, p. 31.

⁵Lincoln Lore, op. cit., Bulletin No. 677, March 30, 1942.

I do not think I could myself be brought to support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoffer at religion If then, I was guilty of such conduct, I should blame no man who should condemn me for it; but I do blame those, whoever they may be, who falsely put such a charge in circulation against me.⁶

⁶ Allen Ford (ed.), Illinois Gazette, August 15, 1846. The handbill likewise appears in the Tazewell Whig, August 22, 1846; Roy P. Basler (ed.), Marion Delores Pratt and Lloyd Dunlap (asst. eds.), The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Vol. I, p. 382. Cited hereafter as Basler.

III

SLAVERY

Lincoln did not believe in slavery but was not for violently tearing it out of the Union. He favored gradual and compensated emancipation and the prevention of slavery from spreading into new Federal territory. Where slavery was established he would be patient, but of course he hoped for its ultimate downfall. What he was adamant about was the preservation of the Union when the slavery question threatened to divide it. Before the Emancipation Proclamation a runaway slave might be sent back to the rebels, but after it was issued, the North was willing to use, and did use, the aid of Negroes--the South lost their aid. Many in the North wanted emancipation just prior to its announcement. But Lincoln could see both sides of a question. He could put himself in the Southerner's shoes. T. V. Smith says:

" . . . But the ideal of a healing justice informed his legal practice and permitted him to see both sides of issues in controversy--both sides indeed of even the national disunion. 'If all earthly power were given me', says he of slavery, 'I should not know what to do (about it)'. Meantime he would return fugitive slaves to the South, and would not sit in

harsh judgment upon Southerners 'for doing what Northerners', said he, 'would have done'.¹

Lincoln did not allow personal emotion to influence his administration. He kept his ear turned to catch the revelation of God's will. He wanted to know that he was right. He tried to use common sense and deliberation to help guide his actions into the proper channels. He tried not to let his own feelings stand in the way of just treatment for others. Smith says of Lincoln's words: "I am naturally anti-slavery [observed Lincoln of his deepest moral self]. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think and feel". There Lincoln clearly reveals the stuff of which certitude is mostly made, feelings enkindled in childhood and fed with the provender of custom and enhanced by the osmosis of sympathy. Lincoln probably saw Negro slaves sold on the block at New Orleans; we know what at least he is reported to have said about it. ("If I ever get a chance to hit this thing, I'll hit it hard"). Still, for all his personal certitude against its wrongness, he goes on to say: "Yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling . . . and I aver that, to this day I have done no official act in mere difference to my abstract judgment and feeling on

¹Smith, op. cit., pp. 48-49.

slavery". Smith goes on to say:

Slavery is not the only illustration in Lincoln's life, though it would appear crucial enough, of this fine-edged scrupulosity. I believe no other public man ever lived, certainly none in America, who kept so constantly in mind, and so often let slip into formal utterance, such overtones of logical rectitude. Typical is the concluding sentence of the speech at Cooper Union, which sent him speeding toward the White House: "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it". That qualifying phrase inserted against all the need for oratorical emphasis, is as conclusive as it is concluding. Here was a statesman who even in the field of politics carried to a degree not elsewhere matched, the double-entry bookkeeping so honorable to science: of what one believes and what one knows. It is Lincoln's service of an Ideal which in the conventional division of labor was not his own, more even his responsibility--the ideal of Truth--that reinforces Lincoln's title to an apostleship in the spiritual life of mankind.²

Lincoln had the Emancipation Proclamation ready and waiting in his desk. He had covenanted with God that if he would give a Northern victory, it should be issued. This would show God's direction and also the proclamation (according to Seward) should be supported by military success instead of being issued during the time of Northern defeats. The victory came with the battle of Antietam. The Proclamation was issued. Before this happened, however, Smith tells of an incident which took place:

To the White House came, in 1862, a deputation of Christian ministers who had somehow discovered--

²Smith, op. cit., pp. 41-42.

so they said--what God willed Lincoln to do with reference to emancipation. "I am approached", began he to them in a mood embarrassingly empirical, "with the most opposite opinions and advice, and that by religious men who are equally certain that they represent the divine will". He hazarded then the opinion, hoping it would not strike them as "irreverent", that if God was going to reveal to anybody what Lincoln's duty was, He would reveal it to Lincoln himself, and then he earns the accolade "scientific" by adding: "These are not, however, the days of miracles, and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect a direct revelation. I must study the plain physical facts of the case, ascertain what is possible, and learn what appears to be wise and right."³

After the fall of Richmond, President Lincoln wanted to see that city. The colored people there thronged him with feelings of love and gratitude. He spoke to them:

My poor friends, you are free--free as air. You can cast off the name of slave and trample on it; it will come to you no more. Liberty is your birthright. God gave it to you as he gave it to others, and it is a sin that you have been deprived of it for so many years. But you must try to deserve this priceless boon. Let the world see that you merit it, and are able to maintain it by your good works. Don't let your joy carry you into excesses. Learn the laws and obey them; obey God's commandments and thank Him for giving you liberty, for to Him you owe all things . . . "⁴

Lincoln made a vow before God that if Lee's army was driven out of Maryland he would issue the Emancipation

³ Ibid., pp. 37-38.

⁴Admiral D. D. Porter, as quoted in Paul M. Angle's The Lincoln Reader, p. 510.

Proclamation which his cabinet had generally looked on with disfavor a short time before.¹ Barton says of this famous Proclamation that Lincoln issued:

This was no platitude uttered to meet the expectation of the religious people of the United States; it was no evasive generality intended to fit whatever religious desire might be in the minds of those who heard him. It was no masquerade; every motive of pretense or hypocrisy or duplicity was absent. It was the sincere expression of the abiding faith of Abraham Lincoln in God, and prayer, and duty. Lincoln believed he was guided and controlled by an infinite power. He believed in a universe ruled by order and law.⁵

⁵Ibid., p. 286.

IV

WAR

The kind heart of Lincoln was saddened by the fearful struggle between the States. In his first inaugural he realized the explosive condition prevailing between North and South; he did not want war but he must "preserve, protect, and defend" the government. Smith says:

His first inaugural describes the goal from which he never wavered, and it was essentially the goal envisaged by Goethe, the goal conceptually immortalized by Plato. See Lincoln fill the canvas with a firm hand: "I am loath to close", he says at the end of the inaugural. "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearth-stone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature".¹

Smith gives us a further insight of the sympathy and understanding that was Lincoln's. It is always good to try to put one's self in the other fellow's place. Smith says: "In 'holy' understanding he declared of the Southerners with sympathy unsurpassed! 'They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist among them,

¹Smith, op. cit., p. 54.

they would not introduce it. If it did now exist among us, we should not instantly give it up".²

Lincoln's endeavor to look beyond one side or the other and try to take an over-all view is expressed by Smith: "When the religious cautioned Lincoln, the war leader, that more reliance should be put on prayer, Lincoln's reply was that "The Rebel soldiers are praying with a great deal more earnestness, I fear, than our own troops". Generalizing this caution, Lincoln put his larger thought in these sentences of scrupulous dubiety: "The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party . . . By His mere power on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began and having begun, He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds".³

While the Civil War was in progress Lincoln made this statement: "My hope of success in this struggle rests on that immutable foundation, the justness and goodness of God; and

²Ibid., p. 64.

³Ibid., pp. 34-35.

when events are very threatening I still hope that in some way all will be well in the end, because our cause is just and God will be on our side". He seemed to trust God to do His part. He sometimes varied this expression and said that he was less anxious to proclaim that God was on his side than he was to be sure that he was on God's side".⁴

"In September, 1862, he received a delegation of friends . . . to them he said . . . 'I have desired that all my works and acts may be according to His will, and that it might be so, I have sought His aid; but if after endeavoring to do my best in the light which He affords me, I find my efforts fail, I must believe that for some purpose unknown to me, He wills it otherwise'"⁵

The above statement of Lincoln's may seem to give a hint that he believed what is to be will be. Smith gives an interpretation of this: "And Herndon quotes Lincoln's wife as reporting what Herndon confirms, that Lincoln's only philosophy was, "What is to be will be, and no prayers of ours can reverse the decree". Here is betokened a reliance upon casual laws, even in politics, which is worthy of a man of science".⁶

⁴Barton, op. cit., p. 88.

⁵Ibid., pp. 88-89.

⁶Smith, op. cit., pp. 33-34.

Perhaps this applies to science, but how can it apply to Lincoln's religious attitude--especially in his later life? Surely in his proclamations one would not feel that he believed prayer useless. If Lincoln thought that, why did he have recourse to prayer as he did?

Lincoln in his own life was a man who believed in forgiveness and mercy. Would he believe God would do less? Schuyler Colfax, speaker of the House of Representatives in Lincoln's administration, wrote in Rice's Reminiscences of Lincoln and quoted Lincoln as saying: "Some of my generals complain that I impair discipline by my frequent pardons and reprieves; but it rests me, after a hard day's work, that I can find some excuse for saving some poor fellow's life; and I shall go to bed happy tonight as I think how joyous the signing of this name will make himself, his family, and friends"! And with a smile beaming on his care-furrowed face, he signed that name and saved that life.⁷

Another touching (though doubtful) incident is related by Taggart that shows mercy even toward Lincoln's enemies: "Summoned once by General McClellan, Lincoln and Stanton arrived on the field of battle, as the lanterns of those who were carrying off the dead and wounded were weaving in and out like numberless fireflies. He heard the voice of a wounded boy calling for his mother. He stopped the bearers and knelt

⁷Taggart, op. cit., p. 124.

over the boy. 'What can I do for you, my poor child?'
 'Oh, you will do nothing for me. You are a Yankee. I cannot hope that my message to my mother will ever reach her'. But the tears in Lincoln's eyes, not to say in his voice, dispelled all doubts of his sincerity, and the boy gave his farewell message without reserve. Lincoln had the words set down, and sent by flag of truce immediately into the enemy lines. Then entering the waiting ambulance, he said to his friend, Ward Lemon, his sobs confirming his words, "Mark, my heart is breaking. Sing me something; sing that old song I love, Oft in the Still Night".⁸

One more touching incident related by Taggart shows the kind heart that was in Lincoln. A colonel whose wife had been killed, and who wanted leave to take care of her body but had been denied this by Stanton because a battle was imminent, came to the President for help. Lincoln heard his story, then burst into a sharp condemnation of the man's actions on such grounds as was he (Lincoln) to have no rest; that suffering and death pressed on all of them, etc. The officer was disappointed. He had heard much of Lincoln's kindness. He went away sadly--perhaps to a sleepless night. But early next morning there was a knock at his door. Lincoln was there. He grasped the colonel's hand and said he was very weary the

⁸Ibid., p. 127.

night before, but that he had no right to treat with rudeness a man who had offered his life for his country, especially a man who came to him in great affliction. "I had a regretful night", he said, "and now come to beg your forgiveness".

He had arranged everything, seen Stanton, brought the pass, and a carriage was waiting to drive them to the wharf together.⁹

⁹Ibid., pp. 130-131.

V
LEADER OF THE NATION

Nicolay and Hay say of Lincoln's farewell address upon leaving Springfield: "On the day before he was fifty-two years old he stood upon the platform of a railroad train ready to leave Springfield for the last time. He did not know that it was the last time, but he had a haunting presentment that it might be so. With tears filling his eyes and in a voice choked with emotion, he spoke his last words to his neighbors and friends:

My friends: no one not in my situation can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and to the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a youth to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I may return, with the task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail. Trusting Him, who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me I bid you an affectionate farewell.¹

¹Basler, op. cit., Vol IV, pp. 190-191.
Barton, op. cit., pp. 84-85.

Just before the Civil War was about to break upon this country with all its fury from pent-up feelings of years between the North and the South, we find one of several incidents related "tending to show the solemnity of Lincoln's feelings at the time" as Barton puts it. The following was related by Rev. Dr. Miner, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Springfield, who was intimately acquainted with the Lincoln family, and who visited them in the White House. The story he declared was related to him by Mrs. Lincoln on the occasion of his visit to the White House and was published while Mrs. Lincoln was still living. It appears to rest upon a sound basis of fact: "Here I relate an incident which occurred on the fourth of March, 1861, as told me by Mrs. Lincoln. Said she, ' . . . Mr. Lincoln wrote the conclusion of his inaugural address the morning it was delivered. The family being present, he read it to them. He then said he wished to be left alone for a short time. The family retired to an adjoining room, but not so far distant but that the voice of prayer could be distinctly heard. There, closeted with God alone, surrounded by the enemies who were ready to take his life, he commended his country's cause and all dear to him to God's providential care, and with a mind calmed by communion with his Father in heaven, and courage equal to the danger, he came forth from that retirement ready for duty'".²

²Scribner's Monthly, 1873, p. 343. As quoted in Barton, op cit., pp. 86-87.

Without prayer, Lincoln could not have been the leader he was. In the Abraham Lincoln Association papers is found a statement that puts prayer as the key to Lincoln's strength. " . . . he threw himself upon this profound faith and found rest; not so much in formal prayer--though, in later years, prayer became first a necessity, then a habit--as in quiet inner trust. It was the hidden spring of his strength, his courage, his unbending firmness, the secret of his patience--which Meredith said is a large part of faith--and of his unfailing pity".³

Charnwood says: " . . . His theology, in the narrower sense, may be said to have been limited to an intense belief in a vast and over-ruling Providence "⁴

Charnwood further says of Lincoln's spiritual life:

So humorous a man was also unlikely to be too conceited to say his prayers. At any rate he said them; said them intently; valued the fact that others prayed for him and for the nation; and as in official Proclamations (concerning days of national religious observance) he could wield, like no other modern writer, the language of the Prayer Book, so he would speak of prayer without the smallest embarrassment in talk with a general or a statesman. It is possible that this was a development of later years. Lincoln did not, like most of us, arrest his growth.⁵

³Lincoln Association Papers, op cit., 1933, p. 33.

⁴Lord Charnwood, Abraham Lincoln, p. 437. Hereafter cited as Charnwood.

⁵Ibid., p. 438.

The Lincoln of maturity was a different man to the Lincoln of youth in a religious sense. John Hay said of Lamont's work on the life of Lincoln concerning his religion: " . . . and I think it safer to follow Lincoln's own words in his maturity than the reports and rumors of what he may have said in his youth".⁶ This indeed does sound reasonable.

R. C. Roper gives his interpretation of Lincoln's religion:

Lincoln was an extremely religious man, though not a technical Christian. He thought deeply, and his opinions were positive. His seriousness was a characteristic trait, showing itself even in his genuine good humor. His very jokes were a part of his seriousness . . . Lincoln was an extremely practical man. He believed not for belief's sake, but for his own sake. He made a practice of religion; he used it. His religion was his life, and his life was his religious service. It was his own public profession. Religion was a fact to him. He believed in prayer, because he found use for it: and when the fate of the Union seemed to waver, when doubt and despair hovered over the land and the future was uncertain, Lincoln often shut himself within his room and offered up his prayer to God. "So many times", he said, "I was forced to my knees, not knowing where else to go".⁷

In speaking of the fruits of Lincoln's life, Charnwood says: " . . . This man had stood alone in the dark. He had done justice; he had loved mercy, he had walked humbly with his God. (Taken from Micah 6:8; Theodore Roosevelt's

⁶John Hay, as quoted in Benjamin P. Thomas, Portrait for Posterity, p. 43. Cited hereafter as Thomas.

⁷R. C. Roper, Religious Beliefs of Abraham Lincoln, Open Court, 1903, pp. 76-85 as quoted in Barton, op. cit., p. 227.

favorite passage of Scripture). The reader to whom religious utterance makes little appeal will not suppose that his imaginative words stand for no real experience. The reader whose piety knows no questions will not be pained to think that this man had professed no faith".⁸

In speaking of the Civil War, Lincoln's leadership and God's wrath because of this nation's part in slavery, Taggart says: "The storm proved more terrific; more prolonged, more chilling, more drenching, more trying on mind, body and soul than he could have anticipated. But he never deserted his post or gave up hope. It was God's storm, but it was also God's ship, and he could bring it through. Meanwhile, the storm must be endured. But with every thunder crash, he seemed to grip the wheel tighter, and say 'Thy will be done'".⁹

⁸Charnwood, op. cit., p. 441.

⁹Taggart, op. cit., p. 335.

VI

LINCOLN AND PREACHERS

One preacher who had an influence for good on the life of Lincoln was Dr. Smith. To him is attributed the clearing of Lincoln's mind of some erroneous beliefs concerning religion. Dr. Smith, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Illinois, wrote a book called The Christian's Defense. Lincoln read this book. To use Dr. Smith's own words concerning the matter, he says:

It was my honor to place before Mr. Lincoln arguments designed to prove the Divine authority and inspiration of the Scriptures, accompanied by arguments of infidel objectors in their own language. To the arguments on both sides Mr. Lincoln gave a most patient, impartial and searching investigation. To use his own language, he examined the arguments as a lawyer, who is anxious to investigate truth as he investigates testimony. The result was the announcement made by himself that the argument in favor of the Divine authority and inspiration of the Scriptures was unanswerable.¹

Ninian Edwards, Mr. Lincoln's brother-in-law, said:

"A short time after the Rev. Dr. Smith became pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in this city, Mr. Lincoln said to me, 'I have been reading a work of Dr. Smith on the evidences of Christianity, and have heard him preach, and converse on

¹Rev. James A. Reed, The Later Life and Religious Sentiments of Abraham Lincoln, Scribner's, July, 1873, p. 333. As quoted in Barton, op. cit., p. 158.

the subject, and am now convinced of the Truth of the Christian religion'."²

Mr. Herndon seems to think otherwise concerning the book for he says: "One thing is true, that the said Reverend Dr. Smith of Scotland presented Lincoln with a book written by said doctor; Lincoln brought it to the office, laid it down, never took it up again to my knowledge, never condescended to write his name in it, never spoke of it to me"³

The weak point in Mr. Herndon's statement is where he says, "never took it up again to my knowledge". If Lincoln started to draw away from Herndon in his religious thinking, it is possible that Lincoln would read the book to himself and keep his thoughts to himself. Lincoln may have read the book without Herndon's knowing it, at any rate.

Concerning Lincoln's religious beliefs Barton has to say: " . . . Lincoln was, according to the testimony of a number of these men who had known him, not an infidel, nor even a deist, but essentially a universalist".⁴ Barton goes on to say:

That Lincoln had some doubts concerning the person of Christ is not a point. He believed in God, and he knew the fact of sin, and he was dyed-in-the-wool in arguments concerning the fall of the race in Adam and its redemption in Christ,

²Barton, op. cit., p. 164.

³William H. Herndon, as quoted in Taggart, op. cit., p. 42. Hertz, William H. Herndon letters and papers. The Hidden Lincoln, p. 77.

⁴Barton, op. cit., p. 137.

but he did not dwell as did the preachers on individual forgiveness, which he sometimes doubted, but sought to evolve a legal and moral scheme with a final restoration"5

But Barton does not concede that Lincoln is a Universalist; he says: "It is my opinion that Lincoln did not believe in endless punishment, and also that he did not accept the supernatural birth of Christ. But I do not regard him as a Universalist or a Unitarian. The basis of his religious belief was Calvinism of the most rigid sort. It could accept some incidental features of other systems, but at heart it was Calvinistic"6

But doubts, though logically answered, still rose in Lincoln's mind. On the other hand, and more important, Lincoln did not find himself able to accept the rigid Calvinism of that day. The evangelist made strong appeals, and Lincoln was not unmoved. But he said to his friends that "he couldn't quite see it".7

Barton continues: "But though a Calvinist in his early training, he was not ready to accept Calvinism as a complete and articulated system as presented in the Westminster Confession and in the preaching of Dr. Smith".8

Taggart says concerning Dr. Barton's statements of Lincoln's degree of Calvinistic belief: "Just what, Dr. Barton, is the

⁵Ibid., p. 139.

⁶Ibid., p. 238.

⁷Ibid., p. 257.

⁸Ibid., p. 258.

distinction between the 'Calvinism of the most rigid sort' in which as you say Mr. Lincoln did believe, and the 'too rigid Calvinism of Dr. Smith' which you say he could not accept? Have you not confused us by making Predestinationism synonymous with Calvinism? Mr. Lincoln accepted the one, but could 'not quite see' Calvinism as a whole".⁹

But note that Barton said, "The basis of Lincoln's religious belief was Calvinism of the most rigid sort . . . at heart it was Calvinistic". Who knows to just what degree?

Barton tells of another minister who is supposed to have helped Lincoln in a time of trial and who perhaps helped change his views on spiritual things. He was a certain Rev. Francis Vinton, rector of Trinity Church, New York, who was an acquaintance of Mrs. Lincoln and visited Washington and called at the White House soon after Willie died. An incident following the death of Willie has been related on the alleged authority of Rev. Vinton. As reported, he said to Mr. Lincoln: "Your son is alive". "Alive!" exclaimed Mr. Lincoln. "Surely you mock me". "No, sir, believe me", replied Dr. Vinton; it is a most comforting doctrine of the church, founded upon the words of Christ himself!" . . . Dr. Vinton (so the narrative proceeds) told Lincoln that he had a sermon on the subject. Mr. Lincoln asked him to send it to him as early as possible, and thanked him repeatedly for his cheering and hopeful words.

⁹Taggart, op, cit., p. 288.

When Lincoln received the sermon he read it over and over, and had a copy made for his own private use. A member of the family said that Mr. Lincoln's views in relation to spiritual things seemed changed from that hour".¹⁰

Concerning the death of Willie, Lord Charnwood also says: "To Mrs. Lincoln it seemed that with the death of their child Willie, a change came over his (Lincoln's) whole religious outlook. It well might; and since that grief, which came while his troubles were beginning, much else had come to Lincoln; and now through four years of unsurpassed trial his capacity had steadily grown, and his delicate fairness, his pitifulness, his patience, his modesty had grown therewith".¹¹

However, such incidents in the life of Lincoln as the death of his son Willie must have only been steps along the way to his complete identification with the followers of Christ. Speaking of the Gettysburg address Lincoln made, John Wesley Hill says:

That was a great day for Lincoln, for the Union and for generations unborn, a day of national consecration. It was a day when Lincoln, whose religious life had steadily grown from the death of his mother, completed his consecration and reached the satisfying consciousness of his relationship to God; for the day following his return to Washington, he remarked to a visiting friend: "When I left Springfield I asked the people to pray for me; I was not a Christian; when I buried my son, the severest trial of my life, I was not a Christian; when I went to

¹⁰Frank B. Carpenter, Six Months in the White House, pp. 117-119. Barton, op. cit., p. 207.

¹¹Charnwood, op. cit., p. 438.

Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ".¹²

Speaking of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Hill again says in referring to the expression, "new birth of freedom":

With the doctrine of the "new birth" he was familiar. While a lawyer in Springfield he had heard what he characterized as a "great sermon on the new birth", preached by the Rev. James F. Jacquess, and later spent an evening at the home of Dr. Jacquess, discussing the subject with him, an interview that closed with prayer. It was, therefore, by deliberate intent that the "new birth" was introduced at Gettysburg. "Under God" was the arch beneath which he thought and wrought. Never once did he lose sight of God.¹³

There is a story of the conversion of Lincoln, but it rests solely on the story of one man. That man, Colonel Jacquess, was a good and honorable person. He was a Methodist minister and evidently the same man previously referred to. This is evidently the same Jacquess who in the Civil War became a Colonel and went with Mr. Gilmore on a peace mission to Jefferson Davis. In an address the preacher-soldier Jacquess told of the event in Lincoln's life.

Jacquess said that Lincoln listened to one of his sermons and a few days later called on him to talk about it. He says:

I invited him in, and my wife and I talked and prayed with him for hours. Now, I have seen persons

¹²Lincoln's Memorial Album, O. A. Oldroyd, p. 566. As quoted in John Wesley Hill, Abraham Lincoln, Man of God, p. 276. Cited hereafter as Hill.

¹³Ibid., p. 274.

converted; I have seen hundreds brought to Christ, and if ever a person was converted, Abraham Lincoln was converted that night in my house. His wife was a Presbyterian, but from remarks he made to me he could not accept Calvinism. He never joined my church, but I will always believe that since that night, Abraham Lincoln lived and died a Christian gentleman.¹⁴

This was probably the same incident just referred to, but if this took place before the war while Mr. Jacquess was still acting as a pastor of a church, and before he became a colonel, one may wonder just how to make this incident compatible with Lincoln's words as quoted from Hill that Lincoln was not a Christian when he left Springfield, and not until he saw the graves of many soldiers at Gettysburg did he consecrate himself to Christ.

Sandburg says of Jacquess: " . . . of the minister's sincerity and courage, there is abundant evidence". Also James R. Gilmore in Down in Tennessee speaks highly of him.¹⁵

However, Barton says of the incident:

. . . The story as it is thus told lacks confirmatory evidence. If Lincoln was converted a considerable number of events which occurred in subsequent years might reasonably have been expected to have been otherwise than they really were. Each reader must judge for himself in the light of all that we know of Abraham Lincoln how much or how little of this story is to be accepted as literal fact. The present writer cannot say that he is convinced by the story.¹⁶

¹⁴Edgar DeWitt Jones, Lincoln and the Preachers, p. 24. Cited hereafter as Jones.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁶Barton, op. cit., p. 242.

Not all people thought Lincoln was ever a convert to Christianity as did Rev. Jacquess.

Jones tells of announcing one time in 1909 that he would preach a sermon on the religion of Abraham Lincoln next Sunday. A certain Francis Marion Emerson said to him: "So you are goin' to preach on Abe Lincoln's religion next Sunday?" Pastor Jones nodded his head in affirmation. "I'll be out to hear you! I never knew Abe had any religion worth preaching about". Mr. Emerson had met Lincoln once or twice.¹⁷

Jones brings out the fact that Jewish leaders loved Lincoln. Dr. Nathan Krass was a Rabbi. He gave an address at the Buffalo Ad Club, Buffalo, New York, February 12, 1914 in which he paid tribute to Lincoln.¹⁸

Different religious groups claim Lincoln. Jones says: "No one communion can ever claim Abraham Lincoln to the exclusion of all others. He was greatly and grandly, yet withal simply, a Christian in love and tenderness. His Christianity was unique, nonsectarian, and undenominational".¹⁹

Sherwood Eddy in The Kingdom of God and the American Dream says: "Lincoln never came under the influence of a single intelligent spiritual minister during his early life."²⁰

¹⁷Jones, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 143.

²⁰Ibid., p. 15.

That is a strong statement and Jones does not quite agree with it.

"Henry Ward Beecher was an intimate friend and advisor of Abraham Lincoln, though, while editor of "The Independent", he severely criticized some measures of Lincoln's administration".²¹

"And it was a devout Roman Catholic priest, Father Chinquy, who 'found him the most perfect type of Christian'."²²

²¹Hill, op. cit., p. 231.

²²Ibid., p. 345.

VII

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Lincoln never joined any denomination, did not get his name on any church record as a member of that group. He gave indication that he intended to, but it may prove of interest to the reader to learn why this never happened. Because he did not join church may have been reason enough for some to brand him as an infidel or irreligious.

"Believing in advancing truth, Lincoln always refused to be ruled by dogma or a frozen creed. . . . Lincoln saw as few men of sentiment ever see, how sticky is the notion of brotherhood unless it be between equals; and he saw more, that the only way to keep it between equals is to deny to anyone's conviction a priority of access to moral certainty. What Lincoln saw, we too might see if we became more generous and if we were less afraid".¹

Perhaps it did seem to Lincoln that a church member had reached that stage of Christian achievement where he was established, fixed in belief, or grounded in faith and had an experience that Lincoln could not feel he could honestly subscribe to.²

Why he did not and could not join church as a young man in Indiana has already been mentioned.

¹Smith, op. cit., Editor's Blurb.

²Hill, op. cit., p. 318.

Barton says that when Lincoln did not know what to do he would not do anything. Concerning church membership, Barton says: " . . . The evangelist made strong appeals, and Lincoln was not unmoved. But he said to his friends that 'he couldn't quite see it'.

"Lincoln was a man of mighty courage when his convictions were assured. But he was also a man of more than normal caution. He could meet an issue which he was fully convinced was right with all needful heroism. But he was capable of evading an issue about which he was uncertain".³

Representative Dunning, according to Barton, gave a reason why Lincoln put off joining a church. Mr. Dunning said in his Eulogy of Lincoln:

I am here reminded of an impressive remark which he made to me upon another occasion, and which I shall never forget. He said he had never united himself to any church because he found difficulty in giving his assent, without mental reservations, to the long complicated statements of Christian doctrine which characterize their articles of belief and confessions of faith. "When any church", he continued, "will inscribe over its altar as its sole qualification for membership the Savior's condensed statement of the substance of both the law and gospel, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself'--that church will I join with all my heart and soul".⁴

³Barton, op. cit., p. 257.

⁴Eulogy upon Abraham Lincoln before the General Assembly of Connecticut, 1865. As related by Representative Dunning and quoted in Barton, op. cit., p. 94.

Smith says in this respect: " . . . Abraham Lincoln died as he lived, a secular mind clairvoyant of all spirituality. He did not join church, nor could he have joined one, churches being what they were and his sense of fitness being what it was. He is reported to have said that he would join a church, if ever he found one roomy enough of spirit. Such was not to be found in the Christendom of his age"⁵

Church membership is good, no one will deny, when that membership is of the one great universal church of which Christ is the head. Louis Austin Warren seems to think Lincoln could qualify for membership in Christ's Church. He says:

The religion of Abraham Lincoln invited a more exhaustive study than any other single topic in Lincolniana. It is difficult to reconcile this fact with the knowledge that he was not a member of any organized church body. Regardless of his failure to affiliate with an orthodox religious group, he is recognized as the embodiment of the highest ideals of the Christian order. Hundreds of clergymen have testified to his soul culture, and today ministers are enthusiastic exponents of his sublime but simple faith.⁶

"To put it once more, he did not hold the theology of the church, and if he is to be judged by that test, he was not a Christian".⁷

But if a Christian is one who loves God and tries to do His will, loves justice, honesty, mercy, loves people, and is

⁵Smith, op. cit., p. 10.

⁶Warren, Lincoln's Parentage and Childhood, p. 218.

⁷Abraham Lincoln Association Papers, 1933, p. 40.

loyal to truth as he sees it, then may we not call that man a Christian? May we not call Lincoln a Christian? " . . . To put it vividly, the life of a man is his religion, and his religion is his life. . . . He belonged to no church, he (Lincoln) signed no creed--and more than once he told us the reason why. Yet his religious life was real and profound--a kind of poetry, his wife called it--and his faith was so much a part of his very being that one must analyze the man to discover it. . . ."⁸

Wallace Radcliffe, Pastor Emeritus of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Washington, D. C., had this to say of the Lincoln pew in that church:

This pew is an important contribution to the recurring controversy concerning the religious life of the great President. He was regular and faithful in attendance and support of public worship here in the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church and he was a man of prayer and of spiritual ideals. He never made a profession of his faith by church membership, but evidence is available that he assured the pastor of this church, Dr. Gurley, that if he were spared to end his term as President, he intended to make such public profession and that he only deferred it because if made while in office the occasion would make a vulgar noise and be misunderstood and misrepresented. . . ."⁹

" . . . Mrs. Anne C. Fox in referring to Lincoln's church attendance stated: 'Mr. Lincoln was a regular attendant at

⁸Ibid., pp. 28-29.

⁹Wallace Radcliffe, as quoted in Hill, op. cit., p. 319.

church. He always paid close attention to sermons and took an active part in the services'." ¹⁰

Lincoln was never baptized. He may have believed in it and intended to be baptized, but he never was.

Dr. Nathan Krass, previously referred to in his speech at Buffalo, New York in 1914, mentions the New Testament and speaks of Jesus. His reference to religious leaders who were outside the organized church is interesting. It puts the fact that Lincoln did not join a church in a favorable light. He says:

The old Biblical verses are still true-- the first in the old, the second in the new testaments. And the oldest shall serve the youngest, the more powerful the weaker. "The greatest among you shall serve the least". This lesson was supremely illustrated in the personality of Lincoln and that is one of the many legacies he has left us in our great democracy. He left one more, which I shall mention. It was said that Lincoln was not a churchman. Well, what of it? I can name some others that were not in the technical sense churchmen. And I do this not by way of criticism of the church but reverently. For there have been great exceptions in the religious world who stood outside the organized church, not because they were irreligious, but because they were temporarily more comfortable outside the church. Moses was no churchman. Yet, he was profoundly religious. The prophets were not churchmen. Yet, they are the greatest group of religious souls the world has ever seen or heard. Jesus was no churchman. Yet, in the hearts of all these characters, there was that deep, that powerful, that vitalizing sense of spirituality, that absolute feeling of direct communion with God that transcends all externalities.

¹⁰"Lincoln's Church Attendance", Lincoln Lore No. 1185, December 24, 1951.

In this sense, Abraham Lincoln was an intensely religious soul. He believed, and that is his other legacy to us, that real religion is spirituality in action, that divine service is service to humanity, and we are learning that lesson as we never learned it before¹¹

¹¹Jones, op. cit., p. 109.

VIII

CONFLICTING OPINIONS

As has been stated, not all people believed Lincoln had a sincere Christian faith. Let us now learn some differences of opinion that were entertained concerning the religion of Lincoln.

In speaking of Lincoln's Second Inaugural, Lord Charnwood writes:

Probably no other speech of a modern statesman uses so unreservedly the language of intense religious feeling. The occasion made it natural; neither the thought nor the words are in any way conventional; no sensible reader now could entertain a suspicion that the orator spoke to the heart of the people but did not speak from his own heart . . . Many said he was a Christian of great sagacity that "so far from his being a Christian or a religious man, the less said about it the better".¹

Warren G. Harding once said of Lincoln: "His habit of studying both sides of every question and of stating each as strongly as he could was in part responsible for the misapprehensions of some who have held a superficial view of his religious life".²

¹Charnwood, op. cit., p. 436 (Second Edition) or p. 439 (Third Edition).

²Hill, op.cit., p. 13. (Introduction)

While, on the other hand, some may hold the view his intimate friend Noah Brooks held and revealed in his words: "Any suggestion as to Mr. Lincoln's skepticism is a monstrous fiction, a shocking perversion".³

Speaking of Lincoln, Hill says: "His outspoken, but not obtrusive, independence in religious as well as political affairs, sometimes caused him to be misunderstood and subjected to the charge of skepticism".⁴

"Of him (Lincoln) Mr. Herndon, for twenty years his law partner, said: 'As to Mr. Lincoln's religious views, he was in short an infidel. . . Mr. Lincoln told me a thousand times that he did not believe the Bible was a revelation of God as the Christian world contends'".⁵

Taggart says more concerning Herndon and Lamon in their portrayal of Lincoln:

Herndon fairly adored Lincoln as well he might. He was "Honest Abe" to the nth degree, incapable of duplicity, insincerity, deception of any kind whatsoever, incapable of winning a lawsuit when he discovered himself to be on the wrong side, but on another page, this wily politician (Lincoln) realizing the powerful influence of the churches, plays a sharp trick on the poor simple religious folk by pretending to be converted--there is nothing dishonest in deceiving the blind or gullible, we may suppose.

³Ibid., p. 13. (Introduction)

⁴Hill, op. cit., p. 86.

⁵Lamon, op. cit., p. 489.

Well, at least these biographers inadvertently admit that he did change his habits and so affiliated himself with the church people that Lamon says his New Salem associates and the aggressive deists with whom he originally united at Springfield gradually dispersed and fell away from his side! Repelled, we may suppose, by the similarity of their beliefs.⁶

"The many biographies of Abraham Lincoln differ widely in their estimate of his religious opinions and life, partly because the biographers approach the subject from widely different angles, and some of them are seeking in advance the establishment of particular conclusions. . . ."⁷

The book The Real Lincoln was written by Charles Landon Carter Minor, a rebel. Taggart says of Dr. Minor's work:

Although Dr. Minor writes under the title "The Real Lincoln", he conceded in his preface that his work--mostly quotations--"gives only the bad side of Lincoln, and not the good", but he does this because his excellencies have been elaborated by others, and to recount what is already so familiar and to give his excellencies any adequate statement would require a space like the ten very large volumes in which Nicolay and Hay have done their work so ably and with such jealous protection of their hero's good name. The rest of his small volume takes the "adverse" parts of the "adversative" sentences of the histories, biographies, and newspapers, and by patching together this mosaic, gives us a picture of The Real Lincoln. This "real Lincoln" was a cowardly, cruel military despot. . . .

But what interests us here is that the "real Lincoln" was a hypocritical, scoffing skeptic who once (at the age of twenty-three)

⁶Taggart, op. cit., pp. 179-180.

⁷Barton, op. cit., p. 24.

wrote a "little book" against the Bible and the Divinity of Christ which Hill burned, etc., etc. from which views he never changed, but when he entered political life he became "reticent upon his religious opinions. . . ."8

Minor's opinions reflect Herndon's views. The "little book" must be the same as that which was also said to be Hill's letter, since there is a question as to whether it was Lincoln's book or Hill's letter that Hill threw into the fire.

To return to Herndon and Lamon, Hill says of them: "Lamon and Herndon themselves are loud in their praise of Lincoln's singular conscientiousness and integrity. They seek to draw a line between the secular and the religious. They make him secularly a man almost perfect, yet capable of deceiving his friends by concealing from them his skepticism--which would have been hypocrisy".9

Lamon says: "It is very probable that much of Mr. Lincoln's unhappiness, the melancholy that 'dripped from him as he walked' was due to his want of religious faith".10

"Lamon's life of Lincoln lashed into greater fury the tempest that already raged concerning Lincoln's religious faith", says Barton. "Nor was this the only criticism upon it. It was the first of the lives of Lincoln of which the later term of 'muckraking' might be applied, and its

⁸Charles Minor, as quoted in Taggart, op. cit., pp. 171-172.

⁹Hill, op. cit., p. 279.

¹⁰Barton, op. cit., p. 131.

spirit of hostility is best accounted for by the fact that its real author was not Lamon but Black, who not only entertained all the local prejudice which one element in Springfield had against Lincoln, but represented also a bitter political hostility, Black's father having been a member of Buchanan's cabinet".¹¹

John Hay said of Lamon's work on the life of Lincoln, concerning his religion: " . . . and I think it safer to follow Lincoln's own words in his maturity, than the reports and rumors of what he may have said in his youth".¹²

Finally a good friend of Lincoln, Joshua Speed, says of him:

I have often been asked what were Mr. Lincoln's religious opinions. When I knew him in early life, he was a skeptic. He tried hard to be a believer, but his reason could not grasp and solve the great problem of redemption as taught. He was very cautious never to give expression to any thought or sentiment that would grate harshly upon a Christian ear. For a sincere Christian he had great respect. . . The only evidence I have of any change was in the summer before he was killed. I was invited out to the soldiers' home to spend the night. As I entered the room, near night, he was sitting near a window intently reading his Bible. Approaching him I said, "I am glad to see you so profitably engaged". "Yes," said he, "I am profitably engaged". "Well", said I, "If you have recovered from your skepticism, I am sorry to say that I have not". Looking me

¹¹Ibid., p. 133.

¹²Thomas, op. cit., p. 43.

earnestly in the face, and placing his hand on my shoulder, he said: "You are wrong, Speed. Take all of this book upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a happier man".¹³

To Speed alone Lincoln gave his full confidence in the matter of his love affairs, and they talked together as men seldom talk to each other. Speed was speaking out of a most intimate knowledge of Lincoln.¹⁴

No doubt one could go on for some length giving the differing opinions concerning the outlook of Lincoln on the Christian religion, but only some of the significant examples have been given.

To quote Hill: "The time has come not so much to contend for Lincoln's Christian faith as to portray it. . .".¹⁵

¹³Barton, op. cit., pp. 92-93.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 92-93.

¹⁵Hill, op. cit., p. 244.

IX
CONCLUSION

"By their fruits ye shall know them".¹

"During all the impressionable years spent in Indiana, Lincoln was living in a home where a very definite religious atmosphere was created".²

This brings to mind some more words from holy writ:
"Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it".³

Taggart says: "It is stupendously more difficult a task to prove that a man is a Christian, than to demonstrate that he is not. So high is the Christian standard that a single sentence from one's lips or pen, a single act, even where these may have been misunderstood or misinterpreted, is sufficient evidence for the general public to reach the verdict, 'Thou art weighed (in the balance) and found wanting'. But to prove that one is a Christian requires a considerable period of time of unblemished speech and behavior, terminated by death itself, so that only in his epitaph is there general consent to write, 'Here was a Christian'. Perhaps Lincoln began too late".⁴

¹Matthew 7:20. Christ's Sermon on the Mount.

²Lincoln Lore, op. cit., No. 606, November 18, 1940.

³Proverbs 22:6.

⁴Taggart, op. cit., p. 173-174.

I believe the general opinion was then and is now that Lincoln did not begin too late.

Taggart also says of Lincoln: "Believing in that forgiveness through Jesus Christ, he did not despair of his own or of other men's salvation".⁵

I believe that trials and the weight of care threw Lincoln upon the "everlasting arms" and sustained him. As he saw prayer answered, his faith could but grow.

Hill says: "Under the weight of all but killing responsibilities, Lincoln's religious character grew day by day".⁶

Hill also points out: "No honest man can follow Lincoln on his trip to Washington, read the speeches he made all along the way, and doubt that he was a God-fearing and God-trusting man".⁷

Concerning Lincoln's relationship with God, I think he grew nearer to God, that he was progressive in this relationship. For some time he may have been in the spiritual condition of the man to whom Jesus said, "I perceive thou art not far from the kingdom of God". Later in life I believe he was truly a Christian. Perhaps this happened when he saw

⁵Ibid., p. 340.

⁶Hill, op. cit., p. 191.

⁷Ibid., p. 208.

the graves of the soldiers at Gettysburg where he said,
 "I then and there consecrated myself to Christ".⁸

" . . . To know his faith we must follow the path of his spirit, as we trace the style of his oratory from the rather florid rhetoric of his earlier years to the stripped simplicity and haunting rhythm of his later eloquence-- from the Chronicles of Reuben to the Gettysburg Address".⁹

The New York Tribune in speaking of Lincoln's religion says: " . . . It will be as impossible to prove that he was a Christian as to prove that he was not, and historians and biographers will divide upon this question, as they are divided now, according to their personal beliefs or disbeliefs".¹⁰

Isaac N. Arnold says of Lincoln's religion: "I do not call him an 'Evangelical' Christian, but a broad, rational Christian".¹¹

Thomas, speaking of Lincoln's biographers, has this to say: " . . . Those biographers like Tarbell, Charnwood, and Sandburg, who could combine realism with a measure of imagination, have come closest to success. Yet both the realists and idealists have left essential marks. To purge the human clay from Father Abraham is to sunder that

⁸Ibid., p. 276.

⁹Lincoln Association Papers, op. cit., 1933, p. 30.

¹⁰New York Tribune, as quoted in Thomas, op. cit., p. 81.

¹¹Ibid., p. 92.

intangible communion that people hold with him--and to deny his idealistic attributes is to disparage his greatness. Both realism and idealism have a place in Lincoln literature".¹²

Thomas gives us these words from Holland which exemplify Lincoln as a "doer of the word". With a cogency difficult to refute, Holland gave his view of Lincoln's spiritual estate. "The question is not whether Abraham Lincoln was a subscriber to the creeds of orthodoxy", he affirmed, "but whether he was a believing--that is to say, a trustful--Christian man; not whether he was accustomed to call Jesus Christ 'Lord, Lord', but whether he was used to do those things, which Jesus Christ exemplified and enforced. . . ."¹³

"If he had not been a positive Christian", says Hill, "he would have been a rank infidel. Hypocrisy was something of which his worst enemies never seriously accused him. The principle that led him to occupy an uncompromising attitude in politics forced him to a like position in religion. It was not in his nature to temporize".¹⁴

The memory of Lincoln should not be thought of as something sacred. We should hold God or the things of God only as sacred. About any intimacy with Lincoln, any words written by him, or article owned by him, we could use the

¹²Ibid., p. 310.

¹³Holland, as quoted in Thomas, Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁴Hill, op. cit., p. 153.

words precious or prized, for Lincoln was just a man. But what a man among men he was! How precious are his words spoken in his second inaugural from a heart that knew how to love: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are now in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphans, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations".¹⁵

Lincoln was a man who towered above little men in the qualities that make a man great, as he towered in stature above a small man in the physical sense. He was a man close to men, yet sometimes apart and sad.

Joseph Newton has so beautifully said of Lincoln:

A mountain is a mystery; such was Lincoln. It is tall, rugged, isolated; so was he. It has seams and crevices that would disfigure the beauty of a hill, but they constitute no blemish on its massive sublimity. There are sheltered nooks among its crags where wild flowers bloom, and where bright streams sparkle in the sunlight. But there are also huge masses of denuded rock which tell of the harsh attrition of earlier times. The clouds that veil its summit lend it an air of lonesomeness and melancholy. Wild storms beat against it with awful fury waging war with the swift strokes of lightning to the music of deep-toned thunders. Yet through storm and calm it remains unmoved, unshaken. Its mission is the same through all its varying moods. The same God

¹⁵Hill, op. cit., p. 410; Smith, op. cit., p. 95; Basler, Collected Works, Vol. 8, pp. 332-333.

that made the mountain made the man, and His ways are past finding out.¹⁶

Finally Hill says: "In the dome of the Congressional Library at Washington is this inscription from the Prophet Micah: (6:8) 'What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God'. No man in American history--no man in the history of the world--ever more completely filled this measure of a man of God than did Abraham Lincoln".¹⁷

¹⁶Joseph Newton, as quoted in the Abraham Lincoln Association Papers, op. cit., 1933, p. 43.

¹⁷Hill, op. cit., p. 51.

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